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October 27, 2015

To Members of the Massachusetts State Legislature:

The evidence of the deadly opioid epidemic in Massachusetts is stark. Nearly four people lose their lives each day in Massachusetts to addiction and opioid abuse. We write today to thank you for the Legislature's efforts to date in fighting this public health crisis and to ask that you swiftly act on "An Act Relative to Substance Use Treatment, Education and Prevention." The epidemic of opioid addiction sweeping through our cities and towns shows no mercy and we consider the initiatives in this bill to be significant tools in combating this unprecedented crisis. We need bold action to bend the trend in opioid deaths.

Over these past months, both of our administrations have worked closely with medical and addiction professionals on the front lines of this public health crisis to identify strategic reforms to existing practices in dealing with the risks of opioid use and misuse. Some of these reforms will require changes to existing law that can be made only by the Legislature. This bill includes measures to provide medical personnel with the power to intervene with patients in imminent harm as a result of addiction, to control the extraordinary spread of addictive prescription opioids, and to increase understanding and awareness of substance use disorder in our communities and by families.

In 2014, there were 4.4 million prescriptions and 240 million schedule II and III pills dispersed in the Commonwealth – far more than many other states. Those who become addicted to these powerful drugs are 40 times more likely to use heroin. These factors have led the Baker-Polito Administration to propose bold new guidelines to responsibly limit prescriptions of these addictive drugs, which will also reduce the number of unused pills that remain in our communities.

Given the highly addictive nature of opioids, we strongly encourage you to support limiting first-time opioid prescriptions to a 72 hour supply. The legislation provides an important safeguard against potential overuse or misuse of these drugs while allowing doctors to exercise their discretion to exceed this limit in cases of emergency and where patients are suffering from chronic pain. Prescriptions issued for patients receiving palliative care, hospice care, and cancer care would also be exempt from the 72-hour limitation.

We believe another critical component in the fight against opioids requires increasing access to emergency treatment options through our medical system. With your support, we can give medical professionals the ability to save lives and intervene with people who are at the highest risk by establishing a new “front door” for clinical assessment that grants medical professionals the authority to hold a patient for 72 hours of emergency treatment, as a last alternative, if not doing so would create a likelihood of serious harm. This provision would parallel current law permitting a 72-hour period of emergency assessment for persons who present an imminent risk of harm due to mental illness. The bill includes strong provisions for due process and judicial oversight. This bill will also amend the civil commitment statute, Chapter 123, section 35, and end the practice of sending women to MCI Framingham for treatment.

We stand with you and appreciate your dedication to fighting this epidemic. The effort demands aggressive and carefully considered actions. While the Baker-Polito Administration and the City of Boston have dedicated significant efforts and resources to fight the opioid epidemic, the critical reforms in this legislation are needed to prevent and treat addiction. We also recognize that taking up this legislation is one step of many more that must follow to comprehensively address this public health crisis. Individuals from the recovery community, medical professionals, law enforcement officials and policymakers must continue to work together to ensure thoughtful implementation of any policy changes and to build a more robust and adequate continuum of care for those in need across the Commonwealth.

As this year’s legislative session moves forward, we look forward to working with the Legislature on these provisions and related efforts to demonstrate our commitment to work together on critical reforms in substance abuse prevention and treatment. Massachusetts is home to some of the most accomplished medical professionals in the nation, and with your support we have the opportunity to build new treatment pathways and pursue public awareness and education that can begin to break the cycle of deadly addiction.

We have no doubt that every member of the Legislature has heard the same stories of deadly addiction that we have. These stories are a clear reminder that this epidemic knows no boundaries. We look forward to working with you on this critical venture and thank you for your commitment to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Governor Charlie Baker



Mayor Martin J. Walsh